

## PEOPLE - HARDWICK



Duxbury Free Library

Contemporary Authors

---

**Elizabeth (Bruce) Hardwick**

1916-

**Nationality:** American**Year of Birth:** 1916**Place of Birth:** Lexington, KY**Genre(s):** Novels, Short Stories, Literary criticism and history**Table of Contents:**

- [Personal Information](#)
- [Career](#)
- [Writings](#)
- [Sidelights](#)
- [Further Readings About the Author](#)

**Personal Information:** Family: Born July 27, 1916, in Lexington, KY; daughter of Eugene Allen and Mary (Ramsey) Hardwick; married Robert Lowell (a poet), July 28, 1949 (divorced, 1972); children: Harriet. Education: University of Kentucky, A.B., 1938, M.A., 1939; Columbia University, graduate study, 1939-41. Memberships: American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Addresses: Home: 15 West 67th St., New York, NY 10023.

**Education:** Entry Updated : 09/24/2001**Career:** Writer. Barnard College, New York, NY, Adjunct associate professor of English.**Award(s):**

Guggenheim fellowship in fiction, 1948; George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism (first woman recipient), 1966; National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters award in literature, 1974; National Book Critics Circle Award nomination, 1980, for *Sleepless Nights*; Gold Medal for criticism, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1993; Iva Sandrof Award for Lifetime Achievement in Publishing, National Book Critics Circle, 1995.

**WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:**

- *The Ghostly Lover* (novel), Harcourt (New York, NY), 1945.
- *The Simple Truth* (novel), Harcourt (New York, NY), 1955.

- (Editor) *The Selected Letters of William James*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1960.
- *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1962.
- *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (essays), Random House (New York, NY), 1974.
- *Sleepless Nights* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 1979.
- *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays* (essays), Random House (New York, NY), 1984.
- (Editor, with Robert Atwan) *The Best American Essays 1986*, Ticknor & Fields (New York, NY), 1986.
- *History*, 1990.
- (Editor) *The Selected Letters of William James*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1993.
- *Sight Readings: Essays on Writers, Biographies about Them, and Public Happenings Here and There*, Random House (New York, NY), 1998.
- *American Fictions*, Modern Library (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Herman Melville*, Viking (New York, NY), 2000.

Work appears in numerous anthologies, including two volumes of *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories* and six volumes of *The Best American Short Stories* series. Editor, "Rediscovered Fiction by American Women: A Personal Selection" series, Ayer, 1977---. Contributor to periodicals, including *Partisan Review*, *New Yorker*, *Yale Review*, and *Harper's*. Founder and advisory editor, *New York Review of Books*.

## "Sidelights"

An accomplished essayist and novelist, Elizabeth Hardwick is perhaps known "primarily for brilliant literary and social criticism, which has graced the pages of many of the country's leading liberal journals, most notably the *Partisan Review* and the *New York Review of Books*," according to Joseph J. Branin, in a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* article on Hardwick.

Hardwick's first novel, *The Ghostly Lover*, centers on one Marian Coleman. "Throughout the novel, Marian is presented as a profoundly lonely young person," noted Branin. "[She] longs for connection and intimacy with another person but finds it impossible to break through the separateness of the characters in the novel. She is especially disappointed with her mother, whom she adores from a distance." According to Carol Simpson Stern in *Contemporary Novelists*, the novel "offers telling glimpses into her life, the life of her restless parents, the hot, lazy days in the South, the grubby days studying in New York, and the dreams of the ghostly men who pursue her."

*The Ghostly Lover* garnered mixed critical reaction. But soon after its publication, Hardwick was contacted by Philip Rahv, an editor of the avant-garde *Partisan Review*, to become a contributor. "She accepted the offer eagerly and thus began her long and successful career as a social and literary critic,"



Branin wrote. As Hardwick's reputation as a writer grew, so did her fame outside the editorial offices. She married the poet Robert Lowell in 1949, a union that lasted until 1972, when Lowell divorced Hardwick to marry Caroline Blackwood, an Irish writer. "In 1977, the last year of his life, Lowell returned to Hardwick," related Branin. "They summered together in Castine, Maine, before Lowell died of heart failure in New York." Hardwick told a *New York Times* reporter that her former husband was "the most extraordinary person I have ever known, like no one else--unplaceable, unaccountable."

Hardwick's published works include a second novel, *The Simple Truth*, a story of speculation and accusation surrounding a sensational murder trial. "Tightly plotted, probing the motives behind a frightful act, the novel examines the death of a beautiful college girl, Betty Jane Henderson, who died in her boyfriend's rooming-house, after hours," explained Stern. "The trial of the boyfriend, Rudy, dominates the book. It is examined from numerous perspectives, most important those of two curious onlookers, the affable, married Mr. Parks and the middle-aged, married Anita Mitchell who is drawn to the case to investigate the working of the unconscious. The truth about the act, late at night, in a rooming-house where two lovers frolicked and struggled, ultimately emerges, but equally as interesting is the picture of the psyches of the characters who become caught up in the trial."

The author's third novel, *Sleepless Nights*, "is a difficult work to classify," commented Branin. One possible definition may be "autobiographical": the fiction centers on a writer named Elizabeth, who grew up in Kentucky and moved to Manhattan. In the course of the story the narrator "remembers certain people and places from her past . . . [Her] compassion for her old acquaintances and her careful observations as she brings these memories to life give the work its power and unity," Branin stated. "The autobiographical component of the novel is openly confronted, and handled effectively," wrote Stern. "Roaming like an insomniac from one recollection to another, the book continually surprises us with its fleeting memories of rooms we have all known, feelings we have felt, losses we have never remedied." Stern observes that "the book is a queer blend of autobiography and fiction. Hardwick's decision to create a persona with her own name heightens our sense of how life informs fiction. The Elizabeth of this book is very nearly the Elizabeth Hardwick who lives, the woman who is a career journalist, writer, reviewer for *Partisan Review* and the *New York Review of Books*, and the ex-wife of the poet Robert Lowell. The memories and imaginings of the persona curl about the lives of deprived souls, of which Elizabeth is one."

Hardwick's essays and critical writings have earned her a substantial reputation. Her 1974 collection, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*, caught the attention of several critics, including Rosemary Dinnage, who remarked in a *Times Literary Supplement* article that the book "is so original, so sly and strange, but the pleasure is embedded in the style, in the way [the author] flicks the English language around like a whip." Hardwick's concern in *Seduction and Betrayal*, according to Dinnage, "is to present her own angry and witty view of the sexes, and for this she has more scope with the fictional beings and the companions of writers than with the great creative women, for these less easily align themselves with the victims." Hardwick "is no hand-wringer," declared *Books and Bookmen* critic Jean Stubbs. "She is a literary surgeon, admirably equipped to expose the nerves." And in the opinion of Joan Didion, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, "Perhaps no one has written more acutely and poignantly about the ways in which women compensate for their relative physiological inferiority."

By the time Hardwick's collection, *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*, was published, she was almost universally acclaimed as a major essayist, prompting *New York Times* reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt to remark, "one is interested in anything that Elizabeth Hardwick writes. That is a given." For this volume of social and literary musings, however, Lehmann-Haupt had some reservations: "The subjects . . . give one a moment or two of pause. The atmosphere in the South



during the civil rights movement of the 1960s? The significance of Martin Luther King, Jr. and of Lee Harvey Oswald and his family? . . . It isn't so much that we've lost interest in these topics as that they've become as familiar to us by now as our fingers and our toes." Another reviewer found more to recommend in *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*: "As these essays of the past 20 years show, Hardwick's [concerns] have two qualities that make her one of our finest critics: a heart that wants to be moved and a critical intelligence that refuses to indulge it," wrote *Los Angeles Times Book Review* critic Richard Eder. "Much that she deals with produces more disquiet in her than reward; she looks for values in the fiery writing of the '60s and the distanced writing of the '70s and finds them poor or limited. Our reward is the record of her search." "Whatever her subject," claimed novelist Anne Tyler, writing in *New Republic*, Hardwick "has a gift for coming up with descriptions so thoughtfully selected, so exactly right, that they strike the reader as inevitable." As Tyler also noted, "Mere aptitude of language, of course, is not sufficient. What makes *Bartleby in Manhattan* memorable is the sense of the author's firm character. 'Pull yourself together,' she says briskly to a racist who tells her he feels sick at the sight of an integrated crowd."

More of Hardwick's essays on literature were collected in *American Fictions*. The subjects range from Sylvia Plath to Truman Capote, from Norman Mailer to Edith Wharton. In "astute, informative, and engaging narratives," Hardwick explores the writers and their work, according to Julia Burch in *Library Journal*. Other critics also praised her unique blend of biography and incisive literary analysis, including a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer who concluded: "Hardwick's smart, eloquent discussions of important works of American fiction bear little resemblance to the normally arid field of literary criticism. Indeed, these fine essays are often as satisfying as the works and authors inspiring them."

In *Herman Melville*, Hardwick offers a short but perceptive biography of one of America's greatest writers. The author of *Moby-Dick* was an intensely private man, with a life "barely public enough for any biographer to pin him down," in the words of a writer for *Publishers Weekly*, who concluded that, despite the lack of solid material, Hardwick is somehow "able to convey both the complexity of the man as well as the inherent impossibility of the biographer's task to fully elucidate the life of a multifarious individual." In twelve chapters, organized more along thematic than chronological lines, Hardwick examines Melville's successes and failures, his perennial financial troubles, his difficult family life, and his homoeroticism, as expressed in his writings and his profound friendship with another American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne. The central focus of her book, however, is Melville's literature. Reviewing the book for *Salon*, Maria Russo concluded: "Perhaps Hardwick's most extraordinary achievement in *Herman Melville* is how she conveys a subtle understanding of Melville's heart and spirit while insisting that she wouldn't dare try to grasp them. We get a glimpse of great genius that's satisfying even as it leaves the mystery intact."

Hardwick "is the voice of toughminded gentility," stated Joan Joffe Hall in a *New Republic* review. "She inspires confidence because she seems just like the reader, a shade smarter perhaps, able to turn the commonplace into revelation, talking in someone's living room with an earnest casualness beyond personality. It's the quality most of us aspire to."

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

### BOOKS

- *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Volume 13, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1980.

- *Contemporary Novelists*, 6th edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1996.
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 6: *American Novelists since World War II*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1980.
- Ward, William S., *A Literary History of Kentucky*, University of Tennessee Press (Knoxville, TN), 1988.

## PERIODICALS

- *American Book Review*, March-April, 1985.
- *Antioch Review*, fall, 1999, review of *American Fictions*, p. 575.
- *Atlantic*, June, 1979.
- *Booklist*, June 1, 1998, review of *Sight Readings: Essays on Writers, Biographies about Them, and Public Happenings Here and There*, p. 1706; June 1, 2000, Donna Seaman, review of *Herman Melville*, p. 1835.
- *Books and Bookmen*, January, 1976, article by Jean Stubbs.
- *Chicago Tribune*, November 25, 1986.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, August 14, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 76.
- *Hudson Review*, winter, 1974-75.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, June 1, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 793.
- *Library Journal*, July, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 90; October 15, 1999, Julia Burch, review of *American Fictions*, p. 70; July, 2000, Henry L. Carrigan, review of *Herman Melville*, p. 91.
- *London Review of Books*, November 17, 1983.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, May 29, 1983, Richard Eder, *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*; September 20, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 8.
- *Nation*, June 14, 1975.
- *New Republic*, May 25, 1974, review by Joan Joffe Hall; June 20, 1983, Anne Tyler, review of *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*.
- *New Statesman*, August 17, 1979.
- *Newsweek*, June 17, 1974; May 30, 1983.
- *New York Review of Books*, January 27, 1974; April 29, 1979; September 24, 1998, review of



*Sight Readings*, p. 4; July 20, 2000, John Leonard, review of *Herman Melville*, p. 4.

- *New York Times*, April 2, 1982; May 24, 1983; July 30, 2000, Erica Da Costa, review of *Herman Melville*.
- *New York Times Book Review*, May 5, 1974, Joan Didion, review of *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*; June 12, 1983, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, review of *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*; July 26, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 10; December 6, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 88.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 25, 1998, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 70; November 8, 1999, review of *American Fictions*, p. 56; May 29, 2000, review of *Herman Melville*, p. 62.
- *Sewanee Review*, Volume 92, number 4, fall, 1984; January, 1999, review of *Sight Readings*, p. 114.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, November 29, 1974, Rosemary Dinnage, review of *Seduction and Betrayal*.
- *Village Voice*, May 7, 1979.
- *Washington Post Book World*, May 12, 1974; May 29, 1983.
- *World Literature Today*, spring, 1980.

## OTHER

- *KYLIT*, <http://www.arh.eku.edu/> (December 3, 2000), Melissa Turner, "Elizabeth Hardwick."
- *Salon*, <http://www.salonmag.com/> (July 26, 2000), Maria Russo, review of *Herman Melville*.

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*. The Gale Group, 2001.

**Source Database:** Contemporary Authors

**PEN (Permanent Entry Number):** 0000042263



Copyright and Terms of Use